SPORN-O-GRAPHICS

An animation newsletter from Michael Sporn Animation Inc.

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Behind the Scenes with Bridget Thorne, Background Designer

Animation versus the Environment

From Voice to Visuals: The Art of Character Vocals and Animation to a Soundtrack

NEW! Buzz about the Animation Industry

Vol. 1

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EDITORIAL

by Michael Sporn

The animation industry has taken a strange turn in the last few years. The entrepreneurs have taken charge and have brought a new feeling to the business. It has become just that, a business, and more so than any time in the past ...

When Hanna and Barbera formed their own studio to produce RUFF & READY, they reintroduced limited animation from the silent cartoons to meet the demands of television. Of course, they weren't prepared for the hunger they would encounter in the ever-growing TV market.

When Disney started producing hundreds of hours of animated product, they naturally took the Disney turn by adding more drawings. Soon everyone had entered the new market. Speilberg reworked the Warners characters with Tinytoons; Warners reworked the Warner characters with their own shows; comic strip characters such as GARFIELD and PEANUTS, rock stars such as HAMMER and NEW KIDS ON THE BLOCK, and TV celebrities ROSEANNE and HOWIE MANDEL have all jumped in to find the fortune.

And if television can be so successful, can a formula for movies be so hard to come by? Give it more movement that TV (everything moves and never in a straight line; if Belle has to move to the other side of the screen, make sure she first comes forward, filling the screen — it's more active). Find a clichéd, pat story that everyone will feel comfortable with (if Feivel can do so well in old New York, imagine how much better and easier it'd be to put him in the Old West!) Add stars — plenty of stars (Robin Williams is the man of the hour;

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If you have a letter or an article for Sporn-O-Graphics, please send to Denise Gonzalez at the address below. Submissions should be typed or word processed and are subject to editing.

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Background Information: Behind the Scene with Bridget Thorne

Interview by Denise Gonzalez

Bridget Thorne is a background designer who has been an important part of Michael Sporn Animation for more than ten years. In that time she has enhanced the look of MSA films with beautiful backgrounds that are, in a way, part of the characters rather than just a scenic backdrop.

DG: How long have you been working with Michael Sporn?

BT: I first started working for Michael in 1979 on **Byron Blackbear And The Scientific Method**, a fifteen minute short for the Learning Corporation of America. It is actually one of my favorites. I started out as a scenic painter for plays. I worked with a designer and basically dressed the set. We'd paint the exteriors, lay in wallpaper, marblizing floors, etc. I started at Williamstown and at Playwright's Variety in New York, I did a lot of off Broadway and off-off Broadway.

DG: Do you see background painting as a complete picture or as a supplement to animated artwork?

BT: It's a supplement.

DG: How do you take that into consideration when you start the backgrounds?

BT: Ideally I take into consideration how the characters are designed. I like the characters to be part of the picture, not stand out like they do in Saturday morning cartoons. It all fits into a stylistic sensibility or pace more than anything else. I'm not a cartoon snob, I'm more of a two dimensional artist than a filmmaker. I design my backgrounds and line style according to the way the characters are designed. What I used to try and do was color the backgrounds, to match the colors of the characters.

Abel's Island

DG: You work out of your home rather than at the studio. What are the benefits or drawbacks of working this way?

BT: I've just started doing this and yes, there are benefits. I can get into my own head, and I take off more with ideas because I'm not interrupted as much. But I like being in the studio and staying with the rest of the production as it goes along.

DG: Do you prefer working on original stories or from an existing book?

BT: It depends on the story. Let's say **IRA SLEEPS OVER**, it was great working out here on that because with an existing

story you have a style to imitate, and it is easy for a whole bunch of people to follow that when they're all working in different places. So as far as production goes, that makes it easier. The great thing about original scripts is that they allow for an incredible amount of individual input.

DG: What do you take into consideration when designing the look of a film and what preparation is involved?

BT: It depends on the story. I tend to have a knee jerk reaction at first or an impulse. I have a Fine Arts background, and I tend to rely on painters. I find fine artists are more in tune stylistically with Michael's films than the more hard-edged graphic cartoons. (Though I will look at Disney inspirational drawings.)

Then I look at the layouts and the character design, so I sort of work on intuition and impulse. Then I look at the existing elements and put those all together and come up with a design. As far as preparation goes, what I consistently do is make 5x4 sketches of design ideas. For **ABEL'S ISLAND** I did lots and lots of little paintings of winter and fall and spring.

DG: When designing the film do you take into consideration that this will be seen by a child?

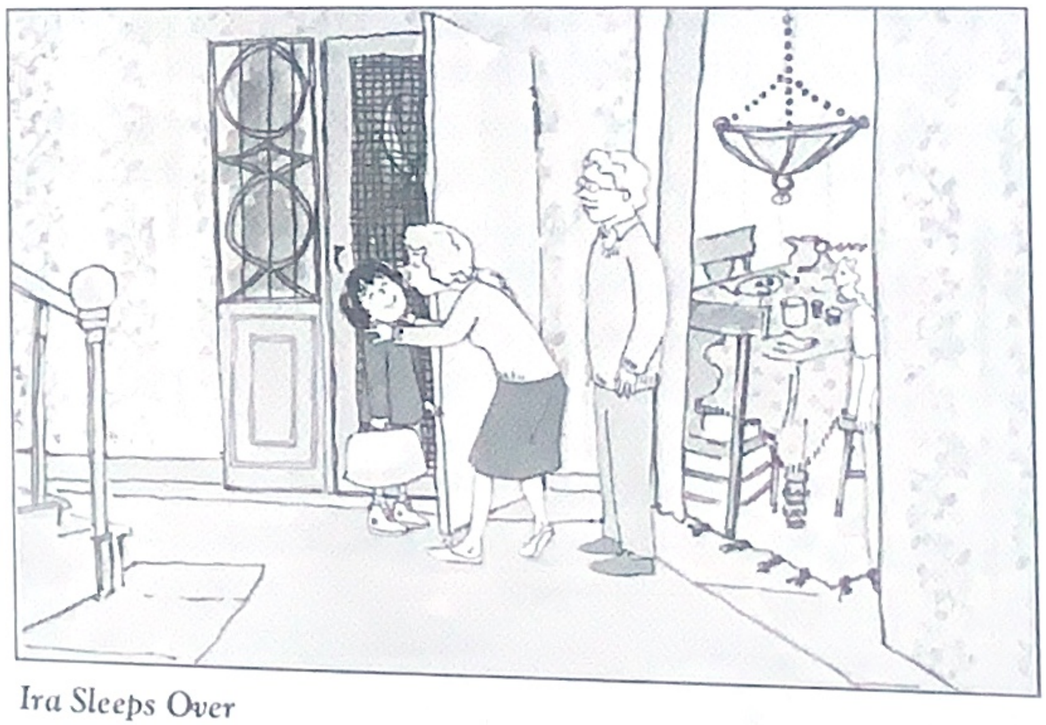
BT: I'm not a cartoony person so I don't think about that. I tend to think more — sometimes I run into trouble this way — I think of it in a frame and ideally what I really want is a balanced look on the screen. A lot of times that's hard because what I see in front of me is so different when it is filmed.

DG: What do you consider to be the best example of your work thus far?

BT: I guess **ABEL'S ISLAND**. I was able to abstract a little. I wasn't confined to chairs and bureaus. I was able to match the mood of the movie to the backgrounds. If Abel was in trouble, I could put colors that indicated that, or I could abstract it. If something was calm I could paint it calmly. Abstraction, or looseness, is more my personal style. This is true of Michael's style, as well.

DG: Have you ever worked on a film you couldn't connect with?

BT: I'd say yes. It's a hard question to answer off the top of my head. I sort of think of movies like they were kids; they are either noisy or funny or quiet or sad. They all have their own characteristics, and it is really the process of making the movie that attracts me to animation. I tend to have different feelings about each movie. But yes, sometimes a story irritates me or something comes in and it doesn't suit my style or what I imagined. It can be very difficult. That's an interesting thing about animation; there is really a sense of compromise; you are compromising all the time. ■



Ira Sleeps Over

FEATURE

Animation vs. the Environment

by Denise Gonzalez

The animation industry recently came face to face with the grim reality associated with productivity in the environmental decline of the 20th century. Here in the United States, Anitec Images, a leading manufacturer of cellulose triacetate, notified their clients that they would cease the manufacturing of this product. Although their operations had always been in full compliance with governmental air regulations, the modifications associated with meeting future regulations were costly and could not be justified for a segment of the company that was not considered primary. "After careful analysis of return-on-investment associated with capital upgrade needed, the decision was made to cease operations within that section of Anitec."

The European equivalent to Anitec, Chromacolour, has instituted a costly new process of manufacturing triacetate cels which has resulted in a professional grade cel that is considered to be the best in the world. Chromacolour's cels are manufactured without polluting the environment by factories that have conformed to strict European community laws. The factory that produces the Chromacolour cel must provide air and water samples to the factory inspector on a weekly basis. The samples are then thoroughly tested and must be of breathing/drinking quality.

Chromacolour has done what Anitec could not and acetate continues to flourish. However, what does all of this mean? How does Anitec's decline and Chromacolour's rise to power affect the domestic animation industry? As the only manufacturer of acetate in the United States, Anitec was able to provide a cost-

efficient product within a reasonable turnaround time. Those days are over.

Suppliers must now look outside the U.S. which means animators will have to order far in advance in order to keep ahead of production deadlines. The greater concern though, is the inevitable price increases that have already forced animators to shop around for the best quality at the lowest cost. Chromacolour's re-investment into an environmentally correct factory will be reflected in their prices. Unfortunately, American animators will have a twofold expense, the increased cel price combined with shipping cost overseas. Cels that once had a unit cost of 13¢ are now up to 17¢ or higher. This may seem insignificant, but when you take into consideration the number of cels a studio uses per year, it could run into thousands of dollars.

One alternative that is currently available to those studios with extremely tight budgets is a xerographic polyester cel which some suppliers stock. As with most things, there are positives and negatives that go hand in hand. The polyester cel is available at a price equal to or less than the old price of acetate.

This is an attractive prospect if money is tight. However, there are still some bugs that manufacturers are in the process of working out. The largest of these bugs and the only one worth mentioning is the sensitivity of the cel. They scratch easily and must be handled with extreme care. But given time, manufacturers hope to end up with an exceptional alternative to acetate. A product that, while environmentally safe, will allow animators to continue in the traditional style that has made this twentieth century art form what it is today. ■

Speaking of Animation...

by Denise Gonzalez

Although the actor and the animator never meet, they share an intimate working relationship. The animator creates the physical body out of which will come the voice of the actor and together they will create a living breathing character. Preparation significantly affects the development of a well-defined character and each must prepare for their role in this creation.

Heidi Stallings is an actress who can be seen in the Broadway musical *Cats* and heard in many MSA productions including **THE DANCING FROG** and **A CHILD'S GARDEN OF VERSES**. For Heidi, voiceover preparation begins with the script. "The first step is to look at the text and figure out what the function of the character is within the world of the script. Then look at the time, place and relationships to other characters and figure out what the author is trying to say and what you have to say through the character. An important thing to look at is the dramatic crisis in the character's life and how it creates her. What is the character's problem or dilemma and how does she deal with it."

"The storyboard is the most important clue as to the vision of the director. It allows you to see the action in the scene, what the character looks like and where the camera is. The reading of a line in relation to the action is extremely important. A line being said by someone crawling out of a window is very different than if the line were said by someone sitting on a bed. It is important to get as many clues together about your character in order to get the most out of the performance."

"Although each voice is recorded separately this need not be a problem. The director should know what he wants and allow the actor to go with any inspiration he may have. If the scene involves

COMING ATTRACTIONS

FOX CHILDREN'S NETWORK: September

The 1992 fall season will have an additional 8½ hours of animation each week. New programs include:

THE X-MEN	Marvel Production
BATMAN	Warner Brothers
DOG CITY*	Jim Henson Productions
SUPER DAVE*	Dic
EEK THE CAT	Savage Steve Holland

* Live action/animation

On HBO:

June

THE TALE OF PETER RABBIT
*IRA SLEEPS OVER**
*JACK AND THE BEANSTALK***

July

*PINOCCHIO****
*THE STORY OF THE DANCING FROG**
*THE MARZIPAN PIG**

** MSA films* *** Animated feature* **** New HBO series*

FEATURES

Film	Animator	Studio	Date
COOL WORLD	Ralph Bakshi	Paramount	July 10
BEBE'S KIDS	Hudlin Bros.	Paramount	July 31

another actor it is helpful to visualize that other person. The physical presence is not important, it's the situation and a good director will set that up. The curious thing about voiceover acting is that the actor does not physicalize him or herself, that is the job of an animator. So you must learn to focus all your energy into your voice. The animator will not see your physical movement so the more you put into your voice the more others will get out of it. Therefore you must pinpoint the dramatic action, know what your character wants and where each scene is going."

Once all the voices have been recorded and cut together, the soundtrack is given to the animator who will now bring the bodiless voices to life. Ray Kosarin has worked as animation director on a number of films at the Sporn studio including the musical **IRA SLEEPS OVER** and **JAZZTIME TALE**. His five years at the studio has given him a great understanding of how to create the best possible character.

"The first step is to have the best understanding of the character and the situation he or she is in. Before making a single drawing you should listen carefully to the entire soundtrack, over and over."

"You need to make note of the way the character evolves so that the animation will be appropriate for the development of the story and the character. The actors are in a very unusual situation in that often it is impossible to see or interact with each other while recording. In a sense they have to work blind and only after the voices are recorded and cut together will you know exactly what the chemistry is between all the characters. This makes it important to listen to the interaction between the character you are animating and the other characters because the chemistry will tell you how they feel about each other and what they are trying to accomplish with each other. This is important if the performance is going to make any sense."

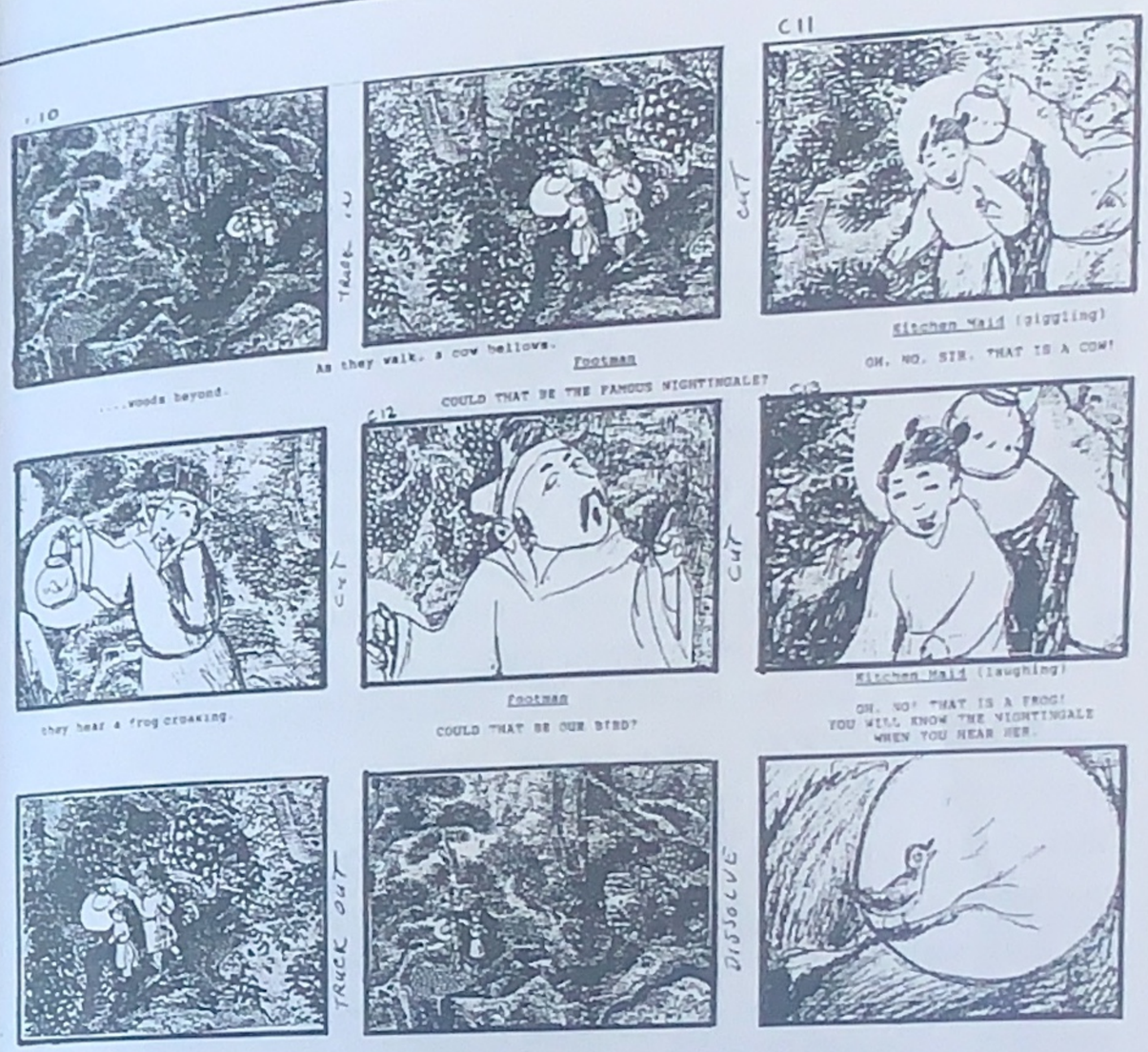
"Usually the characters are designed before the voice recording. But this will only go so far when drawing the character for film. An individual drawing doesn't only have to do with how the character is designed but also with where it falls in the character's movement and the way the character moves will also tell you how he is feeling. If the character speaks as if he is feeling one way and moves as if he is feeling another, you've just lost your character and your audience. So it is important that the animator and the actor are going in exactly the same direction. I think it's essential that you find a connection to the character you animate. Even if you are animating a character you don't like you have to have enough compassion to become him for the time you are animating him."

This is only the beginning. It will take weeks of input from artists, editors and technicians who will combine their talents to give an audience the completed film. ■

Heidi Stallings in character: **The Poky Little Puppy**

The studio has recently completed its second half-hour for 1992 with **NIGHTINGALE,** an original adaptation of the Hans Christian Andersen tale. Scheduled to air in October on the PBS series, *Long Ago And Far Away*, the screenplay by Maxine Fisher, tells of a lonely Japanese emperor whose only true friend is the melodic little bird that sings in the gardens surrounding his palace. The beauty of 14th century Japanese culture is captured in the watercolor backgrounds by Masako Kanayama. In order to sustain the authenticity in the film, a cast of Japanese and Japanese-Americans was brought together. The film stars Mako, whose impressive list of credits includes: *The Sand Pebbles*, *Pacific Heights* and the Sondheim musical, *Pacific Overtures*. His performance as emperor and narrator is done with a strength and sensitivity that is necessary for this particular role. June Angela, who began her career on PBS's *The Electric Company* and went on to win a Tony nomination for her performance in the musical, *Shogun*, takes the part of the kitchen maid who has a close relationship with the nightingale. Combined with the original musical score from composer Caleb Sampson and the talents of all the animators and artists, this film brings to life a new version of the well known tale.

Summer is here, at least to the world outside, but here at MSA it is Christmas as the studio begins production of **THE POKY LITTLE PUPPY CHRISTMAS SPECIAL**. This half-hour special, based on the characters from the 1942 Golden Book, *The Poky Little Puppy*, will be released through Western Publishing and shown on Showtime this Christmas. Since the book was illustrated by Gustaf Tenngren, the principal designer of Disney's *Pinocchio*, it's of special interest to Michael Sporn to stay very faithful to the original design.



Storyboard from **Nightingale**

And finally a PBS special for *Long Ago And Far Away* will have us overlapping projects this summer. **THE TALKING EGGS** is an enchanting adaptation of a Creole folktale, updated. Maxine Fisher's story is of a young black girl whose encounter with a mysterious old woman will change her outlook on life forever. This film will take place in New York City and share a similar style to that of **THE RED SHOES**. Though an airdate has not been set, **THE TALKING EGGS** should be televised in October, 1992. See our next issue for updates. ■

Time moves on. The Cartoon Network will become a reality in October. Turner's new enterprise will program Hanna-Barbera product 24 hours a day. (This is something even the Disney studio hasn't considered.) They have two year' worth of programming ready; it'll be interesting to see what happens after that. Turner has also announced that they'll be producing one feature a year starting with the release of **TOM & JERRY**. (An auspicious debut in that this will be the first time Tom & Jerry will speak in animation!) Hanna-Barbera has also made the same announcement—one film a year. Presumably they're both talking about the same product since Turner owns H&B.

Speaking of features, **FERNGULLY... THE LAST RAIN FOREST** and **ROCK-A-DOODLE** have come and gone from our theatre screens. (In New York, they both played regularly for a week, then became matinee-only items.) **ROCK-A-DOODLE** will be available in video this August. Neither film was a blockbuster, yet both seem to be expected to recoup their investments.

This summer we can look forward to **BEBE'S KIDS**, **COOL WORLD**, and **PINOCCHIO's** re-release. It'll be interesting to see how all three films will do. Will **PINOCCHIO** do as well as **101 DALMATIONS**? You have to remember that **PINOCCHIO** was already released in home video and is now the first video issue to be re-released to theatres. **BEBE'S KIDS** is the first animated theatrical to feature an all Afro-American cast. **COOL WORLD** is Bakshi's return to "adult" animated fare. It's unfortunate that a lot of negative publicity has preceded this film regarding Kim Basinger's participation. Let's hope this doesn't turn the film into the animated version of *The Marrying Man*.

All this attention to the box office records has clouded one very important question. Are the films any good? We can see from the likes of *Encino Man* that you don't have to have a good

movie to make a lot of money. There's an overabundance of work in production, but the animators don't seem to be questioning the work they're doing. (Being able to animate on a film doesn't necessarily make the film any better.) Maybe filmmakers should start looking at the stories they're making! Animators, of course, should do the same. Remember: **THE NINE LIVES OF FRITZ THE CAT**, **METAMORPHOSIS**, or **TALES OF AN AMERICAN RABBIT**? Stories certainly had a good hand in destroying these films. (I'm sure you can name a number more!) If a lot of mediocre features flood the market, the studios will stop production. It doesn't matter if the film has celebrity voices and great production values; if the story is bad the film will help burst the bubble that's been built in the market. It's time for animators to show that they're still creative!

The unhappy news concerns Richard Williams and Warner Brothers. The film Dick has been producing for the past 28 years, **THE COBBLER AND THE THIEF**, finally found backing once Dick had given the money men **ROGER RABBIT**. Wanting to cash in on the animation craze, Warner Brothers gave Dick money for his feature. But once the feature went $10 million over that budget and went behind in schedule, Warner Brothers pushed their insurance bond company to step in. They did. Dick's studio and all the artwork was packed up and closed down. Dick is no longer involved in his own project. Warner Brothers is going to make sure it gets completed; those last 17 minutes. Unfortunately, when it seems like there may be one great film on the animation horizon, something goes awry.

Hopefully, those last 17 minutes aren't going to destroy the effect of the other 60.Hopefully, Dick will be called back to complete the scoring and sound work and get to see the film to the finish. ■

EDITORIAL

EDITORIAL continued

he's won a Grammy for *Rabbit Ears*, gotten the only laughs in FERNGULLY, and is about to take over ALADDIN). Mix it all well and you have an animated feature.

And it all works! Everybody's doing well. The features are making money — if not in theatres, then on video. (The very least you can say is they're not losing money.) Give us more and more TV shows; there aren't enough. Even Turner's all cartoon network will run out of material in two years.

There's only one problem; there's not much great work being done. It all just moves; it moves fluidly but that has nothing to do with character development. There was a time when one felt the characters were actually thinking. Now we're happy if they're moving!

Presumably, some animation-loving producer will come along to try to make things better, and will actually have a successful film for the effort. This will change the entire medium again. For the moment, let's watch closely and not just idolize Tinytoons characters because they're moving! ■

The Great Cel-Out

Do you like the stories you've seen from Michael Sporn studios? Now is your chance to own a piece of the action! Just check the name of the film you like and write the name of the character(s) and scene you want below. Make out a check or money order for $33.00 per cel, and send it with this page to the following address:

Michael Sporn Animation, Inc.
632 Broadway
New York, NY 10012
attn: Cel-Out

Within 4 weeks you'll receive a handsomely matted cel. (Note: if your name and address are not on the mailing label on the back of this page, please include them with your order.)

The following is a list of films whose cels are currently available:

Film	Character/Scene
❑ ABEL'S ISLAND	_____
❑ THE DANCING FROG	_____
❑ THE RED SHOES	_____
❑ THE MARZIPAN PIG	_____
❑ MIKE MULLIGAN & HIS STEAMSHOVEL	_____
❑ EARTHDAY BIRTHDAY	_____
❑ LITTLE MATCH GIRL	_____
❑ EMPEROR'S NEW CLOTHES	_____
❑ NONSENSE & LULLABYES:	
POEMS *	_____
NURSERY RHYMES *	_____
❑ IRA SLEEPS OVER	_____
❑ JAZZTIME TALE	_____
❑ CHILD'S GARDEN OF VERSES	_____
❑ NIGHTINGALE	_____
❑	_____

* Cel clipping made from original art

In release from Family Home Entertainment

Michael Sporn Animation, Inc.
632 Broadway
New York, NY 10012